

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Nathan Nutting, Jr. 1804-1867

In the context of building and development in the rural inland towns of western Maine during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Nathan Nutting, Jr. stands out as a figure of distinction. Born to a farming family in Otisfield, Nutting designed and built structures that brought the tenets of classical architecture to communities just breaking out of the isolation of first generation settlement. His works serve as illustrations of the transmission of academic design principles espoused by trained architects and published design manuals to wooden vernacular buildings constructed to serve an agrarian population that settled this region of the state. Economically designed and constructed, his buildings display a clarity of line and judicious use of ornamentation that reveals some knowledge and training in the classical aspects of architecture tempered with an apparently innate conservatism. In this latter trait, he was undoubtedly responding to the tempers of a clientele who like himself were grounded in a Calvinist doctrine and were still intimately aware of the rigors of frontier life. Any discussion of his accomplishments must be prefaced with the knowledge that his first Federal style buildings of the 1820s were built in a region where log construction was being practiced well into the eighteen-teens.¹

Nutting was the youngest of four sons born to Nathan and Rhoda Nutting, who settled in Otisfield in 1796 and built a low posted Cape style house, probably with the assistance of Nathan Senior's older brother Peter, a trained carpenter.² Few records survive to give us a clear picture of young Nathan's upbringing, but a creditable family tradition asserts that about 1820 he traveled to Boston to study architecture and the building trade. A later generation claimed that he was apprenticed to a "famous architect" there, but no records to confirm this or that can offer a clue as to the identity of the architect have been located.³ However, his surviving buildings confirm a working familiarity with the architectural

design manuals of Asher Benjamin (1771-1845), especially *The Country Builder's Assistant* (1797), *The American Builder's Companion* (1806), and *The Rudiments of Architecture* (1814).

Nutting's acquaintance with these works is illustrated in his first known commission, the enlargement of his parents' 1790s Cape by the addition of a two story house for his recently married brother Lyman, who was to eventually acquire the entire family homestead⁴ (Figure 1). This took place on Nathan's return to Otisfield from Boston about 1824-25 and is notable in the use of stylish Federal ornamentation on what is otherwise an eighteenth century center chimney form house. Its denticulated cornice is a direct copy of the "Ionic Cornice" illustrated in Plate 8 of Benjamin's *Country Builder's Assistant*. This complements the "Venetian" entrance doorway of the house, evidently derived from Plate 27 of *The Rudiments of Architecture*. Nutting used Benjamin's design as a point of departure by compressing the freestanding pillars and porch roof into flattened side pilasters supporting a Doric entablature and cornice based on Plate 4, the "Doric Order," in *The American Builder's Companion*. Working in a vernacular tradition, Nutting's semi-elliptical overdoor opening is filled with a louvered wooden fan instead of the lead glass of Benjamin's design, and his sidelights display an intriguing early use for the area of a Greek Revival inspired muntin pattern. Even with these minor variations, however, the doorway in both scale and execution is virtually a literal copy of Benjamin's copper plate engraving.

In Otisfield in the 1820s, the house must have attracted considerable attention and served as an advertisement of Nutting's talents, for it is evident that it led to additional commissions throughout the town and surrounding area. Nutting's papers and drawings were destroyed in a fire in 1913, and there exists little primary documentary evidence to ascribe private homes to him. Yet several firm attributions are possible because of similar design characteristics and the identical nature of molding profiles used in the construction of these buildings, indicating a common builder.⁵ This is especially true in the Bolster's



Figure 1. Lyman Nutting House, Otisfield, 1974 view (MHPC).

Mills section of Otisfield and neighboring Harrison, a small settlement that attained a notable measure of prosperity in the late 1820s and 1830s due to the saw and grist mills powered by the abundant water power at this location. Here at least four houses built between 1826 and 1835 appear to be by his hand. The earliest of these, the Isaac Bolster, Jr. House of circa 1826, is a rather simple story-and-a-half Cape. It is embellished with a nearly identical version of the "Venetian" doorway of the Lyman Nutting House, which on this smaller structure takes on almost monumental proportions. The house lacks an ornamental cornice, but displays a masterful handling of proportion and design that allows the central decorative feature of the doorway to stand out but not overwhelm.

The Daniel Weston House of 1828 commands the intersection of the village across the river from the Bolster House and is a close copy of the Lyman Nutting House in both form and finish. The only significant variation is the use of an Ionic cornice on the central doorway to complement the Ionic cornice at the roofline. Just to the east, the Dr. Silas Blake House of 1834 is a twin chimney square house with side gable roof that is distinguished by a central entrance enframed with Doric pilasters supporting a Doric entablature and cornice but omitting the fan opening above the door. A near twin, the Stephen Waterhouse House of 1835, exhibited this same doorway treatment and stood next to the Isaac Bolster, Jr. House until its recent destruction by fire.⁶

Nutting's only known residential work outside of Otisfield occurred in 1832 when Maine State Senator and Brigadier General of the Militia John Perley

(1779-1841) of nearby Bridgton engaged Nutting to at least assist in, if not oversee, the building of his imposing home in the South Parish of that town (Figure 2). The house was Bridgton's largest and most elaborate rural residence at the time and was finely furnished with articles bought in Boston, Salem, and Portland.⁷ However, its most notable trait was the use of a pseudo-peripteral Greek Temple form with a T-shaped main block flanked by a recessed porch on either side. The Charles Q. Clapp House on Spring Street in Portland undoubtedly provided the inspiration for the Perley Mansion. Entries in Perley's day-book for 1832 reveal that he paid for two trips to Portland for Nathan Nutting, Jr. during the time both houses were being planned and

built. Nutting's hand in the Perley Mansion is probably most evident in its innovative form and is additionally discernable in a lingering Federal aspect of detailing on what is an otherwise Greek Revival design. The tapering square pillars that support the side porches, applied pilasters on the facade, and denticulated cornice are all derived from early Asher Benjamin designs; the pilasters themselves are identical to those enframing the doorway of the Lyman Nutting House. The Perley Mansion was demolished by its owners in 1964 for expansion of farming activities at the site.⁸

Several Cape style farmhouses with distinctive front entries embellished with attenuated pilasters and classically inspired entablatures that still survive in the Otisfield area suggest that Nutting continued to be active in residential building well into the 1840s and possibly beyond. Yet his most significant contributions to the built environment of Maine would be carried out in the arena of several church commissions built over a five year period beginning in 1836. These buildings, often the architectural centerpieces of their communities, take Nutting's work from the purity of classic Federal design through permutations to modified versions of the Greek Revival.

In 1836-37 the First Congregational Church of Waterford built a new meetinghouse and retained Nutting to execute the project⁹ (Figures 3, 4). The structure he built for them was a classic New England Federal style meetinghouse featuring a pitched roof and projecting pedimented entrance pavilion of two floors with paired entrance doors. Rising from this pavilion and straddling the roof of the main building was a single



Figure 2. General John Perley Mansion, South Bridgton, late nineteenth century view (Courtesy of Bridgton Historical Society).

stage tower surmounted by a belfry with arched openings and a domed roof. Each of the windows and doors of the building were topped by arched openings with louvered fan inserts. Similar in general form to churches built in neighboring Bridgton and Norway by other contractors at about the same time, Waterford's church was particularly distinguished by its belfry. Although somewhat massively executed, it is probable that Nutting drew his inspiration for its design from the belfry of a church design illustrated by Asher Benjamin in Plate 39 of his 1806 *American Builder's Companion*. The arched openings, canted corners with pilasters, and shallow dome roof were derivative of this design. This church, which illustrated Nutting's Federal design talents for public buildings in their purest form, was destroyed by fire in 1928.¹⁰

Probably inspired by his accomplishments at the Waterford Church, the people of Otisfield hired their native son to replace the original 1797 meetinghouse there with a new church in 1837-38¹¹ (Figure 5). Drawing from his Waterford design, Nutting constructed a virtual duplicate of it on Bell Hill in Otisfield, where it still stands. The Bell Hill Meetinghouse copied line for line the main body of the Waterford Church, but placed the tower and bel-

fry athwart the main gable of the church building, thus emphasizing the ascending pediments of the entrance pavilion and main block. The belfry differs from the Waterford example in that it forsakes the arched openings and canted corners of the latter for the more rectilinear forms associated with the Greek Revival. The applied pilasters barely mask the heavy corner piers that support a plain entablature and balustrade which in turn visually anchor the somewhat higher and more naively conceived dome roof that sits on an octagonal drum base. The unity of the Waterford design expressed through the arched rhythms of the window and door fans, arched belfry openings, and shallow dome of the belfry roof is here interrupted by the apparent heaviness of the belfry design as seen in juxtaposition with the more delicately executed arched openings of windows and doors below. The building is a transitional statement for Nutting, for his succeeding work would show adaptation and advance toward the simpler lines and heavier trim of the Greek Revival.

Nutting's next known church commission was for the Congregational Church in New Gloucester (Figure 6). Erected in 1839, this building is a significant departure from his work immediately preceding



Figure 3. First Congregational Church of Waterford, Waterford Flat, circa 1920 view (MHPC).

it. Gone is the pedimented entrance pavilion of the Waterford and Bell Hill Churches, replaced here with a recessed first floor colonnade supporting an overhanging second floor whose facade pilasters continue the lines of the columns to support a heavy Greek Revival entablature. The high pediment that enframes the roof line has an inset triangular panel of clapboards which echoes the facing of the lower parts of the building. Over all rises a low square tower capped by a squat version of the Bell Hill belfry with squarish openings and Greek Revival paneled pilasters at its corners. The domed roof is an almost perfect half-sphere set on an octagonal drum base masked by a low balustrade as at Bell Hill. While the design for this church is distinctive and proved to be the basis for emulation elsewhere, it was evidently not a successful composition for Nutting; for it remains his only known example of this form.¹² It does, however, reveal a mind willing to experiment with new concepts.

Closer to home, Nutting built a church for the residents of Casco in 1841 and returned to a more box-like meetinghouse form.¹³ Along with the Universalist Church of 1844 and the Wesleyan Chapel of 1845 in South Waterford, this is the simplest of his known church designs, comprised of a gable front building with a plainly enframed pediment, double entries, three bay side elevations, and slightly varying versions of the rectilinear belfry capped with a high dome on an octagonal drum base.¹⁴

In the years between the erection of the Casco and South Waterford

churches, a house was built on land adjoining Lyman Nutting's homestead lot in Otisfield that exhibits a number of features pointing to Nathan Nutting, Jr. as its designer-builder. As originally built for a Nutting relative, the Green-Nutting House of circa 1842 is a gable front Greek Revival structure with paired end wall chimneys, wide corner pilasters that echo those of the New Gloucester Meetinghouse, and an inset sidelighted central entrance doorway enframed with wide molded boards and corner blocks, an elaboration of a finish technique used around the windows and doors of the Casco Church. Considering Nutting's use of the Greek Revival

style in his known buildings of this period, it is probable that this previously unattributed house was built by him.¹⁵

Nathan Nutting, Jr.'s career spans a period of time when the nascent towns of his area of western Maine rapidly developed from frontier settlements to full-fledged agricultural and industrial villages which both desired and could afford the conservatively designed, yet fashionable homes and public buildings of the type that Nutting provided. Beginning his career in the Federal aesthetic, he was willing and able to keep abreast of changes in architecture by adapting to the Greek Revival. The ability to adapt new styles can be seen as a hallmark of his work. This being so, it is tempting to speculate on the authorship of the design of the circa 1848 Joseph Hancock House in Otisfield, built directly across the street from the Green-Nutting House. An early



Figure 4. Interior, First Congregational Church of Waterford, Waterford Flat, circa 1920 (MHPC).



Figure 5. Bell Hill Meetinghouse, Otisfield, 1974 view (MHPC).

Victorian “cottage,” this eclectically styled little building is in basic form a story-and-a-half side hall plan house. The paneled corner pilasters are much like the pilasters that distinguish the belfry piers of the New Gloucester Meetinghouse. The house uses Gothic Revival board-and-batten siding with eared window hoods in combination with paired eave brackets of Italianate design, and the recessed side-lighted entrance takes its inspiration from the earlier Green-Nutting House example. The house exhibits a sureness of execution and a hand well experienced in construction that belies the apparent naiveté of its design. In much the same vein that he moved to Greek Revival forms by slowly introducing elements of the style onto basically Federal style buildings, repeating the pattern of his initial attempts at Federal design by placing classical ornamentation on eighteenth century center-chimney forms, it is possible that this was an attempt by Nutting to adapt to more eclectic revival styles. In the absence of Nutting’s papers, it is difficult to state that this is one of his efforts, but the evidence inherent in the design and construction of the Hancock House coupled with its location in a neighborhood of other buildings associated with him would point to a tentative attribution.

Much like his early years, the last two decades of Nathan Nutting, Jr.’s life are somewhat enigmatic. The 1850 census lists him as a mechanic and the owner of a steam sawmill, and the Maine Registers for 1855 and 1862 identify him as a house carpenter.

Then in his fifties, it is possible that his activity in carpentry was being increasingly curtailed to smaller projects and repairs of existing buildings. He died in 1867 and is buried in the graveyard within sight of the Bell Hill Meetinghouse.

Thomas B. Johnson

FOOTNOTES

1. Although for the most part considered temporary shelters by their builders, the construction of log structures is a known building practice in this area of the state during the early nineteenth century. In Otisfield the circa 1812 Levi Sargent House survives to document the late application of this early building practice. For discussion of the use of log construction in this period, see Randall H. Bennett, *Oxford County Maine: A Guide to Its Historic Architecture*, Bethel, 1984, pp. 307-09.
2. According to the genealogy of the Nutting family as published in William Samuel Spurr, *A History of Otisfield, Maine*, Otisfield, 1949, the Nathan Nutting, Sr. family probably lived in an existing log “hut” on their property until the erection of a frame house about 1796-97. Peter Nutting, who trained as a carpenter in Groton, Massachusetts, and came to Otisfield to build the first meetinghouse in 1797, in all probability assisted with the building of this house, which still stands.
3. Letter from Albert Deane Nutting (1906-1990) to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., dated June 15, 1974, Maine Historic Preservation Commission files. Most of Nathan Nutting, Jr.’s papers were burned in a fire that destroyed his son’s house in 1913, and no records have been located that identify the purported architect. One family member suggested “Bullfinch” [sic], but this is discounted by the fact that Charles Bulfinch left Boston for Washington, D. C. in 1817. A more probable candidate would be Alexander Parris (1780-1852), who worked in Boston from 1815 until his death. Parris had spent part of his childhood in Otisfield’s neighboring town of Hebron, and members of his family still lived there by 1820, suggesting possible social contacts between the families that might have resulted in the arrangement of an apprenticeship for Nathan with Parris in Boston. Certainly Nutting’s familiarity with the works of Asher Benjamin could have come from this source. At present any link between Nutting and Parris is at best tenuous conjecture.
4. For a full discussion of the evolution of the Nutting Homestead in Otisfield, see Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, University Press of New England, 1984, pp. 87-95.
5. Spurr states in the *History of Otisfield* that Nutting was not only a “master builder” and “good mechanic” but also made carpenter’s tools and planes. The molding planes used to fashion the architraves and other features of the Lyman Nutting House were, on the basis of profile comparison, employed in the finish work on buildings ascribed to his hand in Bolster’s Mills and a

number of much simpler vernacular cape-style houses located in the immediate vicinity.

6. The Stephen Waterhouse House was much remodeled in the 1970s for conversion to a nursing care facility, but the exterior features of the main building remained remarkably intact until they were destroyed by fire in the spring of 1992.
7. Records detailing the building and furnishing of the Perley Mansion are in the Perley Papers, Bridgton Historical Society Archival Collections, Bridgton.
8. Although demolished, a number of photographs, inventories, and accounts of Bridgton people survive to document the structure. Additionally, various architectural elements were salvaged at the time of its destruction. The documentary evidence related to the house is in the files of the Bridgton Historical Society.
9. First Congregational Church of Waterford Parish Records, Waterford.
10. The fire, which began at roof level near a chimney flue, burned quite slowly according to eyewitness accounts, but as Waterford had no fire department at the time, the building was a complete loss. All interior furnishings, records, and memorial tablets were saved, as were the original exterior shutters of the building. Architect John Calvin Stevens of Portland was retained to build a near replica on the original foundations using the salvaged remains. For a complete record of rebuilding and changes suggested by Stevens, see First Congregational Church of Waterford Parish Records, Waterford.
11. Interestingly, the 1797 meetinghouse had been built by Nathan's uncle, Peter Nutting. When this was removed for the present building, its second floor was moved to a location at the foot of Bell Hill and remodeled by Nathan Nutting, Jr. as a town house which survived until replaced with a more modern structure in 1905.
12. A near duplicate of the New Gloucester Meetinghouse plan was built in the town of Oxford by housewrights Otis F. Mixer and Samuel H. King in 1842-43, but with a modified belfry and square supporting pillars at first floor level.
13. JoAnne Robbins, "A History of the Casco Village Church," 1986, typescript, Maine Historic Preservation Commission files.
14. The Casco Church was remodeled in 1871 with the addition of Gothic Revival elements and the insertion of a Gothic window between the two front entrances. In South Waterford, the Wesleyan Chapel remains intact, but the Universalist Church had a raised basement added in the late nineteenth century during conversion to Grange Hall use and lost its distinctive belfry in the 1930s.
15. Most of the detailing of the Green-Nutting House was lost when it was remodeled and covered with synthetic siding in 1992.

KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY NATHAN NUTTING, JR.

Lyman Nutting House, Otisfield, 1824-25, Extant
Isaac Bolster, Jr. House, Bolster's Mills, c. 1826,
Attribution, Altered

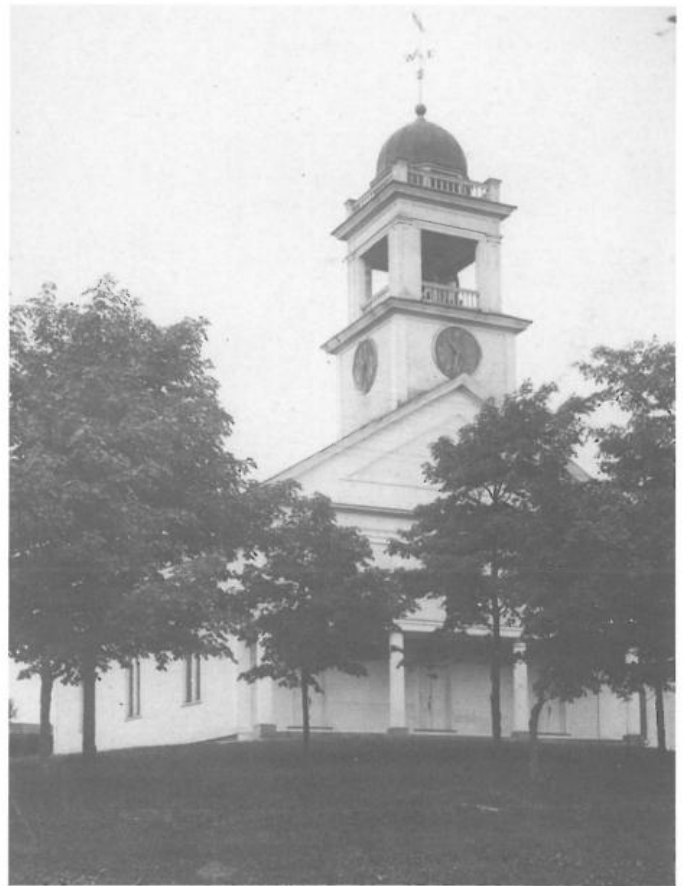


Figure 6. First Congregational Church of New Gloucester, New Gloucester, circa 1910 view (MHPC).

General John Perley Mansion, South Bridgton, 1832,
Destroyed
Daniel Weston House, Bolster's Mills, 1834, Attribution,
Extant
Dr. Silas Blake House, Bolster's Mills, 1834, Attribution,
Extant
Stephen Waterhouse House, Bolster's Mills, 1835,
Attribution, Destroyed
First Congregational Church of Waterford, Waterford Flat,
1836-37, Destroyed
Bell Hill Meetinghouse, Otisfield, 1837-38, Extant
First Congregational Church of New Gloucester, 1839,
Extant
Green-Nutting House, Otisfield, c. 1840, Attribution,
Altered
Union Meeting House, Casco, 1841, Altered
Universalist Meetinghouse, South Waterford, 1844, Extant
Wesleyan Chapel, South Waterford, 1845, Extant
Joseph Hancock House, Otisfield, c. 1848, Attribution,
Extant

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